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ABSTRACT

Dropout prevention is emerging as the most important new issue in education. Broad demographic trends predict a continuing growth in the population of at-risk youth, those most likely to drop out of school. The overall goal of any dropout prevention activity is to reduce the number of at-risk students. This issue is devoted to what research and practice tell us about effective dropout prevention programs. These ideas are organized under seven dimensions: (1) planning; (2) collaboration; (3) parental involvement; (4) school climate; (5) staff development; (6) counseling; and (7) attendance. Six examples illustrate what schools and districts are doing to reduce their dropout rate. (MLF)

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THE PRACTITIONER

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A Newsletter for the On-Line Administrator

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Dropout Prevention Strategies

Dropout prevention is emerging as the most important new issue in education. Broad demographic trends (Hodgkinson, 1985) predict a continuing growth in the population of at-risk youth, those most likely to drop out of school. The overall goal of any dropout prevention activity is to reduce the number of at-risk students. This issue of the *Practitioner* is devoted to what research and practice tell us about effective dropout prevention programs. These ideas are organized under seven dimensions: planning, collaboration, parental involvement, school climate, staff development, counseling, and attendance.

Planning

The responsibility for school dropouts must rest with the district, the school board, the superintendent, district administrators, school principals, teachers, and parents. In general, the dropout prevention literature emphasizes the need for careful planning in the following broad areas:

- Early identification of high-risk students
- The active involvement of teachers in finding the appropriate response to student learning needs (peer counseling techniques, teacher as adviser programs, alternative classes, and alternative schools)
- A district-level plan that takes into consideration the reasons students are leaving school as well as means for assessing needed resources
- Dropout prevention plans for each school
- A vigorous campaign to promote collaboration with community agencies, businesses, governmental agencies, and parents in dropout prevention efforts.

Principals can consider the following ideas in formulating planning efforts at the school:

1. Identify problem areas in the school that contribute to students dropping out:
   - ✓ Course failures; why do students fail?
   - ✓ Discipline policies and practices
   - ✓ Student perceptions of staff members' concern
   - ✓ Staff members' knowledge about the at-risk population
   - ✓ School's educational climate.
2. Assess the school's response to the at-risk population by identifying existing interventions in their operation and effectiveness.
3. Encourage the collaboration of school personnel, businesses, community agencies, government agencies, and parents in dropout prevention efforts.
4. Form a steering committee of school staff members to help plan and carry out specific activities.
5. Establish a survey team of teachers and counselors to identify resource needs and to assess the working relationships among vocational, academic, and guidance personnel.
6. Develop program goals or statements ("where you want to go") and program objectives ("how you are going to get there").
7. Communicate program goals and objectives to students, administrators, staff personnel, advisory committee members, and others in the community.

Collaboration

Plans for dropout prevention must focus on forces that affect the development of the "whole child." Since no one segment of society can bear the full responsibility for ameliorating such forces as poverty

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and disrupted families, a new mentality of collaboration must be developed. Emphasis must be placed on creating linkages between schools, parents, community agencies, businesses, and institutions of higher education.

A coalition of services is more effective than schools trying to be all things to all people. The following are some suggestions for establishing linkages with resources outside the school.

1. Establish an "Adopt-a-School" program to involve the business community in school activities.
2. Create a "Cities-in-Schools" program to integrate community resources into the school.
3. Identify available community volunteers to provide tutorial services for students and to develop resources and materials for the dropout-prone.
4. Open your school and bring parents and staff members together for evening socials, student concerts, and joint projects, making the school the focus of the community.
5. Develop school-community advisory councils to review current and proposed school policies.

Parental Involvement

Parents must become significant partners in a student's education. The objectives of parental involvement are to bring teachers, parents, and administrators together to improve understanding of problems faced by both school and parents and to build and maintain support for the school and its programs. A parent-involvement approach can teach parents to be better educators and to utilize family resources to reinforce dropout prevention efforts at home. Schools have a whole variety of techniques available for establishing partnerships.

1. Plan and conduct special workshops that bring teachers, parents, and school administrators together.
2. Plan school tours for parents either during the school day when parents can observe the environment in which their children learn, or after school when tours are more convenient for parents who work.
3. Establish Welcome Wagons composed of parents and school personnel who visit homes and welcome newcomers to the school and community.
4. Plan and conduct parent education activities. Parent education workshops can be held at the school and may address helping students master (state-required) basic skills, preparing for parent-teacher conferences, and learning homework-helper tips. Workshops are often used to help parents feel more confident about assisting their children with schoolwork.
5. Distribute school news to local churches for inclusion in church bulletins.
6. Schedule a home visit with the parents of a truant student. The parents might be more willing to work with the school if they feel the principal and teachers are genuinely concerned about the student.
7. Schedule school personnel to meet with feeder school parent groups to communicate about the school.
8. Conduct demonstration classes for parents to better understand how school classes are conducted.
9. Publicize and hold neighborhood get-togethers to discuss what is happening at school and to address concerns of parents.

School Climate

Many at-risk students feel alienated from school. They feel that no one cares, that assembly-line schools and crowded classrooms have caused schools to become depersonalized. Educational reforms must focus on the affective domain—on ways to make school a more caring, supportive, and nurturing place.

1. Re-examine policies that may encourage exclusion and/or alienation of students, leading them to leave school early.
2. Enlist mentors from business and community groups, volunteers, and peer counselors to provide more personal contact with individual students.
3. Organize inservice opportunities for all teachers to learn the characteristics of at-risk students and ways to raise their expectations.
4. Recognize the role of the school leadership team in establishing a positive school climate. Demonstrate genuine feelings of friendliness and respect. The principal sets the tone of the school; teachers carry it through.
5. Encourage students to participate in cocurricular activities such as intramural sports, clubs, and student organizations, especially those students considered to be at risk.
6. Post calendars that list birthdays and other special occasions in the lives of students, teachers, and other staff members.
7. Work closely with community agencies to create better support services for at-risk students.

8. Revitalize outreach efforts. If educators communicate personally, in a non-threatening way, showing parents how they can help, parents will become involved.
9. Support teachers in using a variety of teaching strategies with high expectations for all students. Ensure a basic skill emphasis with a system for monitoring student performance that includes constant feedback.

Staff Development

Research studies have shown that one of the most important aspects of successful dropout prevention programs is the quality of the school staff members. Teachers and paraprofessionals must have not only strong subject matter skills but a genuine regard for students and a strong belief that these students can learn. Teachers must be excited and enthusiastic about the program. They must have a commitment to a student-centered approach that actively involves students in the learning process in innovative ways.

The following ideas can serve as a strong foundation for staff development.

1. Encourage local higher education institutions to include units on high-risk youth or dropout prevention in exit courses.
2. Collaborate with teacher education centers to develop dropout prevention components for teaching high-risk youth at the education centers.
3. Provide school staff development in discipline, communications training, crisis counseling, and behavior improvement strategies.
4. Create a cadre of "in-house experts" in areas that are relevant to school needs to provide training in computers, assertive and counseling-oriented discipline, and curriculum development.

Counseling

The school counselor's role in dropout prevention activities can be a central one. Counselors can play an important role in identifying at-risk students, providing short-term counseling and referral services, and involving families and parents. They can refer students to support services in and out of school and serve as the crucial link between the classroom and these services. With proper training, school counselors can also provide program coordination, ongoing staff training, consultation, and program development.

The following counseling strategies can be adapted to various settings:

1. Establish a peer counseling program to help high-risk students develop a sense of belonging and usefulness through healthy experiences in a non-threatening environment. Students enrolled in peer counseling courses also develop effective listening and communication skills that can help them and others become more self-aware and self-actualized.
2. Assign each student to a teacher who advises and counsels him or her about academic matters and other school-related activities. Advising is aimed at reducing feelings of alienation and anonymity sometimes experienced by students attending large schools. These feelings are often directly related to students dropping out.
3. Provide counseling to parents of high-risk students on how to give support to their children and deal with their problems more effectively. Counseling can be individual or family, or for a group of parents sharing similar concerns. Parental involvement can make the student feel more connected to the school. This sense of security may reduce the likelihood that the student will drop out.
4. Identify and utilize school dropouts who have reentered school. They often provide positive role models for potential dropouts. They can relate "real life" experiences and are living testimony to the consequences of dropping out.

Attendance

A key dropout intervention that dramatically affects overall school climate is improved attendance. The attractiveness and perceived relevance of school can be improved by an assertive school attendance program. An effective program begins with a commitment by the school and the principal to several proven strategies.

1. Before school opens in the fall, send a postcard with a brief note to each incoming student to let each one know that you look forward to his or her company.
2. Initiate a "peer calling" group in which students within the group call each other when someone is absent to encourage a quick return to school.
3. Develop an "adoptee program" in which volunteers make weekly, informal contacts with high-risk students.
4. Plan a poster, slogan, or essay contest centered around an attendance-related theme. Mount winning posters on school billboards.
5. Include a note from the principal with report cards to recognize perfect attendance.

6. Implement a "School Attendance Review Team" (SART) composed of teachers, administrators, counselors, and a school psychologist to handle attendance problems. Involve the parents and truant students in the SART meeting.
7. Review student attendance records weekly to anticipate emerging absence patterns and to refer students if necessary.
8. Develop jobs for potential dropouts as aides in attendance/administrative offices, with such activities as tallying the day's absences and calling absent students' homes. This kind of activity helps students realize the importance of good attendance and the commitment of others to encouraging it.

To Illustrate

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The PM School. Schools must be flexible and adapt to the needs of disadvantaged students who are at risk of dropping out. Extending the school day and school year is essential for adolescents who have family and work responsibilities that make it difficult for them to attend school during regular school hours.

Emphasis must be placed on creating linkages between schools, parents, community agencies, businesses, and institutions of higher education.

Moreover, an extended school day allows students who may have failed or lost credits to make up their work. The PM School at Roosevelt High School provides youngsters who may be juggling added responsibilities—or who are trapped in the cycle of failing and being held back—with an opportunity to succeed. The school runs from 3 to 5 p.m., three days a week, and serves about 300 students. A variety of traditional classes are offered as well as club and recreational activities. Attendance and achievement levels have been exemplary.

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Peninsula Academies. Students involved in the academy concept begin in the tenth grade and continue through the twelfth grade. They are enrolled in a core academy (school within a school) program consisting of English, math, science, and a laboratory class related to a specific occupation. During the remainder of the day they participate in regular school activities. The program has an exceptionally strong school/business partnership geared to existing job markets. Ten academies have been established in California covering health services, computers and electronics, hotel and restaurant occupations, and business/banking skills.

Ted McCartney, Principal
Bryan Extension Center
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Bryan Extension Center is an alternative, junior-senior high school serving approximately 300 students. Bryan services these students in three separate sessions between 8:00 a.m. and 3:30 p.m., Monday through Friday during the school year. Bryan is part of the Lincoln Public Schools. All four Lincoln public high schools, nine junior highs, the Attention Center, and area group homes may refer students to Bryan.

Students choose to attend Bryan for a variety of reasons. Some have fallen so far behind in their basic coursework because of absences, peer-group, family, or social distractions that they request Bryan's individualized learning packet program to catch up with their class. Some who are parents choose Bryan's flexible scheduling (a 2 1/2-hour school day) so they can devote more of their day to caring for their child and/or employment responsibilities.

Other students schedule a dual program with their regular high school and Bryan Extension Center. Still others from the Attention Center and group homes attend Bryan for the individualized instruction as well as the personalized drug and alcohol support groups that meet regularly.

The philosophy of Bryan Extension Center is to offer youngsters a second chance at education. All students are at Bryan by choice and must adhere to a strict code of attendance and conduct.

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Corporate Mentor Program. Through the collaboration of the Palm Beach County Schools, local corporations, and local media, the Corporate Mentor Pro-

gram has already brought high school dropouts back to school in its first months of existence. This program was initiated by the Palm Beach County Schools and supported by a steering committee of corporate executives. In one month, the members recruited 80 of their own employees to be mentors.

Local television stations and newspapers donate free advertising to publicize a hotline number for school dropouts. The hotline staff members provide information about educational alternatives in the community. Dropouts who express an interest in returning to school are offered the assistance of a mentor. In many cases, the mentor can offer a view of the inner mechanisms of the working world. Mentors call their assigned dropouts daily, checking on their school/work activities and giving them support and advice.

Educational reforms must focus on the affective domain—on ways to make school a more caring, supportive, and nurturing place.

The Corporate Mentor Program has recruited a wide range of dropouts, from those who recently left school to some who have been out for more than 20 years. The community's outpouring of support, including ads designed by a local advertising agency, have been a key in promoting this program.

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The Malden Cluster Program. To meet the unique social, emotional, physical, and cognitive development needs of students in grades six through eight, the Malden Public Schools have reorganized one of their junior high schools, the Beebe School, into smaller teams for instruction in core academic subjects. Team logos, activities, awards, and incentives help to develop a unique identity, spirit, and sense of community within each cluster. Teaching teams receive daily common planning time to foster staff collegiality, monitor student progress, develop an interdisciplinary curriculum, plan cluster activities, and meet with parents.

Block scheduling of team courses allows flexibility in scheduling field trips, guest speakers, and longer and shorter learning modules. Activity periods and a unified arts program provide a high-interest exploratory curriculum for students in various areas of learning. At-risk students participate in weekly group counseling sessions covering peer and family issues, sexuality, substance abuse, communication skills, and problem solving.

Staff members of the two other Malden junior high schools have worked closely with a new middle school coordinator to reorganize their schools into middle schools.

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Communities in Schools (CIS) is an in-school dropout prevention program. There are eight cities involved: Austin, Corpus Christi, Dallas, El Paso, Galveston, Harlingen, Houston, and San Antonio. Each program is modeled after the Houston CIS program that has been operating for eight years and has proved effective in preventing high-risk students from dropping out of school.

Teachers and paraprofessionals must have not only strong subject matter skills but a genuine regard for students and a strong belief that these students can learn.

CIS brings existing resources from the community to the schools. It borrows workers and volunteers from the community social service agencies and industry and makes them available on the school campuses. CIS staff persons are supported by private contributions and funds from corporate sponsors. CIS offers six components aimed at keeping students in school and out of trouble:

- Academic remediation
- Counseling
- Parental involvement
- Health services and referrals
- Enrichment activities
- Job training for students and their parents.

An independent, statewide evaluation of the program has summarized the achievements of Communities in Schools. Nearly 95 percent of the participants remain in school; more than 89 percent of those demonstrating behavior problems have improved; pre-delinquent and delinquent students have stayed out of serious trouble; more than 55 percent of the participants who took part in job preparedness activities were employed; 41 percent of those failing English

prior to their participation have raised their grades to passing levels; and absences have decreased by more than 18 percent.

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This *Practitioner* was developed by Nancy L. Peck and Raymond G. Eberhard. Peck is the director of the Center for Dropout Prevention at the University of Miami and director of special projects for the School of Education and Allied Professions. She also serves as the chairperson for the National Dropout Prevention Network (NDPN). Eberhard is the administrator of the High Risk Youth Unit of the California State Department of Education with responsibility for coordinating the state's dropout prevention and recovery programs. He was recently appointed the executive director of the National Dropout Prevention Network (NDPN).

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